



*T*he Pasha's Peasants:  
*Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt,*  
1740-1858

Kenneth M. Cuno

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*T*he historiography of modern Egypt has often been characterized by attributing most significant "modern" developments to the "impact of the West." This is usually seen as being represented in the French expedition of 1798 or to the active and energetic rule of Muhammad Ali Pasha (ruled 1805-48). Indeed, either of these two events or both of them together are often taken as markers ushering in a new "modern," dynamic, and rapidly changing society and sharply contrasted with a long, stagnant, and generally uneventful "Ottoman" period. The stagnation of the rural economy, in particular, closely studied by Gabriel Baer,<sup>1</sup> is seen to have been finally shattered by Muhammad Ali through his aggressive agricultural policies. This allegedly brought the Egyptian village into direct contact with the international market for the first time, introduced private property in land, and significantly contributed to the stratification of the Egyptian rural society.



Cuno's *The Pasha's Peasants* comes as a welcome and long-awaited study that cleverly and persuasively challenges these ideas about rural Egypt. In the first place, his choice of the time frame overcomes much of the discontinuity stressed by Baer and others and enables him to come to an understanding of social conditions in rural Egypt during the eighteenth century and then to assess the impact on them of the different policies introduced by the pasha. More significantly, to come to a closer understanding of social and economic realities of the period under study, Cuno used a combination of some of the most important original archival material that had been hitherto only slightly used by previous scholars working on the same topic. These include the Shari'a court records, land-tax registers, and cadastral survey registers in addition to the *fatwas* of Shaykh al-Abbasi al-Mahdi, the chief mufti of Egypt from 1847 to 1896.

By a critical use of his sources Cuno is capable of discussing such important issues as the peasant land regime, urban-rural commerce, the rural social structure, and the differences between formal law and peasant customary practices and understandings. He then shows that rather than viewing all significant developments as a result of the "impact of the West," the pasha's policies as well as further developments, e.g., the 1858 Land Law, are "an illustration of how the adaptation of traditional rural institutions and practices, not their obsolescence, was an important part in the making of modern Egypt" (p. 14).

He illustrates, for example, how, far from being a self-sufficient unit, the Egyptian village in the eighteenth century was active in rural-urban trade, witnessed moneylending activities, and was responsive to local and international market signals. Similarly, by reviewing the different legal principles that were allegedly derived from the Shari'a and then contrasting them with their actual implementation and also with what the fellahin made of them, he is able to show that private property in land long preceded its supposed introduction by the 1858 Land Law. In addition, by relying on the land-tax registers he is able to show that the pasha's policies did not create a stratified rural society *ex nihilo* but have accentuated an already existing stratification.

In the light of these findings the question might be raised as to the reasons behind the persistence and the longevity of the previous view, that is, that which drew a sharp line differentiating developments in the nineteenth century from their "Ottoman" predecessors and which insisted on the existence of a sharp break between Mu-



hammad Ali's policies and those of the Mamluks, for example. Cuno deals with this important question in an informative and interesting epilogue about the history of the "progressive view of the development of Egyptian agriculture." In a manner resembling Said's "archaeological" methods he traces that view from Issawi and Baer to de Sacy and Artin, who in their turn were influenced by Hanafi viewpoints as to the absence in the Shari'a of the principle of private property in land. Although inaccurate and misleading, the reason this view was in high circulation was because it fitted the interests of a number of Egyptian national historians who were fascinated by the figure of the pasha as well as those of foreign observers who saw "the principal force for change was Egypt's integration in the world market, not the genius of Muhammad Ali" (p. 206).

Besides these interesting arguments refuting some of the basic assumptions about the pasha's policies, Cuno's book offers a rich and detailed picture of rural Egypt before and during Muhammad Ali's reign. Having challenged the dichotomous way Egyptian society has been traditionally viewed, he offers a fresh and detailed account of the Egyptian countryside during the period under study. By discussing such interesting questions as the nature and extent of rural-urban trade, the role of the merchants and transportation, the legal variations among courts in the center and in the provinces, and the functions of the *multazims*, sheikhs, *muqqadims*, and *khawlis*, he puts together bits of a jigsaw that informs us richly on the structure and functioning of rural society in Egypt.

There are a couple of areas, however, that Cuno is completely silent about and which are close enough to his study that one would have expected to find him dealing with them. The first is the way the fellahin dealt with the increasing burdens of taxation, monopolies, corvée, and conscription. Cuno does refer to some examples of resistance, e.g., flight from their villages, evasion of conscription, sabotage, and outright revolt, but nowhere do we actually see the peasants as prime actors in this saga of state control and peasant resistance. It even seems that his main interest in depicting these examples of peasant resistance is not because of their importance in and of themselves or, following from Foucault's oft-quoted sentence "Where there is power, there is resistance," as indicators of the forms of power and ways people are caught up in them. Rather, he appears to be using them only to show how these desperate acts were significant in leveling off and even reducing the revenues of the state. One apparent reason for this absence of peasants, especially landless peasants (who were the ones who suffered most by the



state's policies), as main characters in Cuno's book is that he relied on the state's own records, which typically exclude the voice of the people from their accounts. However, it should be noted that housed in the Egyptian National Archives are other sources that could have been more informative about the daily lives of the fellahin under the Muhammad Ali regime. These include petitions presented to the pasha himself in which the fellahin were complaining of different conditions they were subjected to (part of *Diwan al-Ma'iyya al-Saniyya*), police investigations with them (in the various *zabtiyyat*, i.e., records of police departments in Cairo and other regional centers in Lower Egypt), and secular court judgments of various acts that the authorities considered as "criminal" (dealt with in the records of *Majlis al-Ahkam*).

The other blind spot of *The Pasha's Peasants* concerns the composition of the rural elite and its connection with the Turkish-speaking superior officials. Although Cuno spends some effort tracing the fortunes of a number of leading families with rural origins from the early part of Muhammad Ali's rule up to the present time, he says nothing about the corresponding and contemporaneous process of leading "native" families intermarrying with Turkish-speaking Istanbulite, Circassian, and Anatolian families. In the light of Ehud Toledano's recent argument (*State and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, 1990) that nineteenth-century Egypt was characterized by a "great social divide" between the mass of the population and the Turkish-speaking elite, it would have been appropriate if Cuno had dealt with this issue that does touch upon the composition and rise to prominence of the rural elite.

These, however, are not serious misgivings about *The Pasha's Peasants*, which, like all good books, raises interesting questions as much as it answers others and points to areas in which further research could be undertaken. In short, this book is an important and much needed addition to our understanding of this crucial period of the recent history of Egypt. For the first time we have a book in English that deals with the century or so of events leading up to and including Muhammad Ali's rule and his agricultural policies, and which relies heavily on the rich and yet largely untapped archival sources of the period. Presented in a well-argued and detailed manner, Cuno's book will be welcomed by specialists in the field, while the interesting and lucid manner in which he presents his arguments will make it accessible also to those interested in the general questions concerning peasant societies and the modern history of the non-Western world.



### Note

1. Gabriel Baer, *A History of Landownership in Modern Egypt, 1800-1950* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); *Fellah and Townsman in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London: London and Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1982); and *Studies in the Social History of the Middle East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

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